THE BOOK OF DIAMOND DISCS

The Book of Diamond Discs
By Tom Hart
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Introduction

For over a hundred years success in the music industry has meant selling large numbers of records. Whilst the form of what constitutes a “record” has changed many times during this period, the concept of a sale has remained constant. In the 21st century however, this too began to change.

Now in the early 2020s, sales of singles have been reduced to almost nothing. As the sales era draws to a close, this book attempts to document the best selling singles of all time. The Book of Diamond Discs is divided into two sections: the best selling singles of all time - featuring every single that has sold over ten million copies in any format, and the best selling physical singles of all time - featuring the top selling singles of all time in physical formats (i.e. excluding digital downloads).

What is a sale?

Not too long ago it would not be necessary to define this, but as we move into a future where ownership of goods by individuals is becoming increasingly rare, it is possible the idea of a sale will be completely alien to those reading this years from now.

For the purposes of this book, a sale is defined as an exchange of money by an individual for a specific recording of a complete track. Also included are discs or collections marketed as a single which actually include a small number of other tracks. This does not include any kind of streaming or subscription service, nor does it include singles shipped to retailers but never sold to a consumer.

This book covers all singles sales around the world up until the end of 2023.

Accuracy

A dedicated team of researchers and myself have spent the last two years tracking down every last verifiable sale for the recordings featured here, as well as many other recordings that did not ultimately make the cut. Whilst all featured tracks are simply presented as reaching the relevant million threshold, the singles are ranked by a much more precise “representative sales” number. There will of course be a margin for error in these numbers so the rankings within each million level are indicative only. Nobody - not even the labels or artists themselves - knows how many copies each of these singles actually sold, but we feel that the representative figures used here are the best estimates there are ever likely to be. It was only my own time in the music industry - during which I had access to sales figures for many recordings - that made much of the research in this book possible.

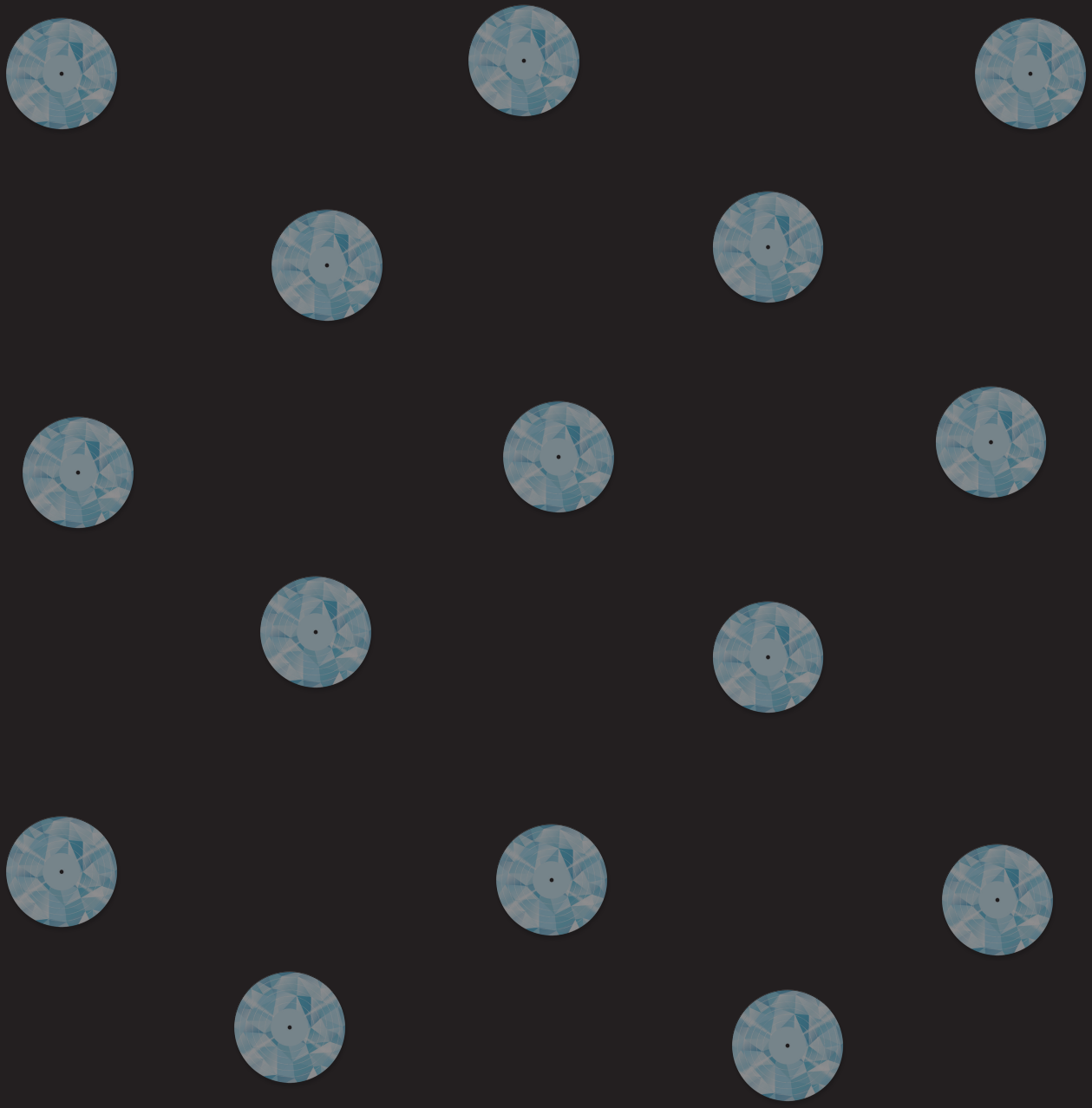
Results

Some of the results of this research will be surprising to many readers - particularly results related to older recordings with very high claimed sales. It is important to remember that most of these high sales figures claims refer to sales of a recording that may appear on many releases, as opposed to sales of a specific single release. Some claims relate to sales of a song, encompassing all recordings by all artists, which is again different to sales of a specific single. Finally, some claims are just false and are presumably made for promotional purposes.

For an older recording, earning a place in this book is an extremely impressive feat. The increasing size of the music buying population over time, as well as changing economic conditions - particularly in the digital era with the low cost of a digital sale - has meant that achieving high sales has become easier over time. A ranking by revenue would no doubt be very different.

Digital sales numbers dwarf physical sales numbers, and the US market dominates world singles sales. With very few exceptions, success in at least one of these two categories is essential to becoming a diamond disc.

Tom Hart



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